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Digital Literature Project: “God was Here, but He Left Early”

Irwin Shaw is a writer who has consistently challenged me. His novels have been adapted into movies and television series, yet critics have consistently labeled his writings as merely “popular” literature, a title he confessed bothered him in a 1983 *NY Times* interview: “‘I cringe when critics say I'm a master of the popular novel,’ he said. ‘What's an unpopular novel? Can you beat the ending of the 'Odyssey' or the Gospels? They're enormously entertaining. Now I'm sometimes regarded as just a popular writer, but so were Tolstoy, Dickens and Balzac and the ghost looking over all our shoulders, Shakespeare’” (Web).

“Popular” taste influences how we determine ideas of essential and critical literature, and recognizing our own biases in that process is important. As an English major, I live in the tension of shifting between contemporary literature and the canon, trying to determine what works can fit whatever parameter I or another peer impose on them. Irwin Shaw lives in the realm of popular literature, and there is not much, despite my belief in his worth, that could change that fate.

But I can remember him, the people he loved, the way he learned to write, and the ghosts of places in his works. His short story collection *Short Stories: Five Decades* reveals a man whose talent and insight into the human condition deserves our attention. Consequently, this digital literature projects adapts multiple short stories from that collection into a Brooklyn digital homage, Shaw’s birthplace and home to a baseball stadium that no longer exists: Ebbets Field. Ebbets was home to the Brooklyn Dodgers before they left in 1957 for Los Angeles, breaking hearts in a borough that had supported the team from 1884. In a project I’m calling “God was Here, but He Left Early,” these people offer glimpses of a time that no longer exists; Ebbets Field was demolished in 1960, and the only reminder it was once there are the writings and memories of people like Shaw.

It was a struggle to determine what to include in this project given his exhaustive writings (the short story collection alone has sixty-three stories), and I had to shift between determining how to present the story of Ebbets Field and Brooklyn in a way reflects our own reading experience. We cannot physically inhabit the place since it has been destroyed, but there remains the possibility of standing, or sitting, alongside these characters as they situate themselves in a changing, anxious world. The narrative voice in the piece never speaks to characters; each italicized thought or narration does not change that character’s fate, but merely reflects the shift in attitude and dialogue Shaw gives to them. With only minor changes, every line of dialogue and narration is taken directly from one of his stories.

In the Information Age, where every opinion clamors for attention and believes in its own inherent value, this project is an homage to how we have always silenced each other in some way. Whether through critical traditions or the destruction of a beloved stadium, our shared humanity shares the weight of forgetfulness and the shelving of authors. As such, there is no measure of work I can put into remembering Shaw that will remove the shackles of imposed criticism. However, perhaps this project has enough worth to meet the only requirement Shaw imposed on himself: “Salvation, for me, lies somewhere on a library shelf.”

Work Cited

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